

# Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature

## Report and Recommendations to Governor Martin O'Malley

### Executive Summary



April 2009



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## Vision for Children in Nature

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Throughout the school year, students use those same areas for outdoor learning and academic study, applying skills and knowledge to meaningful environmental issues investigations. They pose solutions to local environmental problems, and engage the surrounding communities in implementation of an action plan.

All Maryland schools and their grounds serve as community models for green landscape design and operation, energy efficiency and sustainability.

The experiences and lessons gathered throughout their developing years – through classroom learning and outdoor experiences – stay with Maryland's children throughout their lifetimes, preparing them to take active roles in addressing the complex environmental and economic challenges facing our world, and instilling in them a sense of responsibility for and stewardship of the open spaces, waterways and natural resources that so richly shaped their childhood.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

Recognizing the urgency in ensuring that Maryland's young people have the opportunity to connect with nature and grow to become informed and responsible stewards of our environment, Governor Martin O'Malley established the Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature by Executive Order in April 2008 (Appendix A).

Co-chaired by Maryland Department of Natural Resources Secretary John Griffin and State School Superintendent Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick, the Partnership was charged with developing and implementing an environmental literacy plan as well as a plan to provide youth with structured and unstructured opportunities for play, outdoor recreation, learning and scientific study.

This report contains the goals and strategies developed by the 15-member Partnership and 80 work group members to achieve the vision of Governor O'Malley's Executive Order, as well as approaches for developing funding streams and public/private partnerships to implement those strategies.

## Background

In 2007, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) joined forces as part of a national movement to reconnect children with nature. This movement was sparked in large part by a groundbreaking book, *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv. The book explores the negative effects that the dramatic decline in time spent outdoors in unstructured play is having on our children.

Described as "nature deficit disorder," the disassociation of children and nature has been linked to a wide range of behavioral and health issues, including childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression. While most adults over the age of 30 spent large portions of their childhood outdoors in spontaneous and unstructured play with other kids, today's youth are more likely to be inside watching television or playing video games.<sup>1</sup>

Research also shows that the positive impacts of spending time in nature on a child's physical, cognitive and social development may be significantly greater than imagined.<sup>2,3</sup> National experts increasingly point to the need for youth to experience frequent, unstructured play in the outdoors that emphasizes fun, discovery, creativity and spontaneity.



DNR formed an internal Children in Nature Matrix Team, which included representation from employees across the agency, to develop a comprehensive strategic plan (Appendix B), which provided the foundation of the Governor's Executive Order.

Nearly concurrent with the activities of the Department, a group of environmental education providers and advocates also raised the banner of children in nature, launching the No Child Left Inside Coalition. The Coalition formed a broad based network of 47.5 million individuals and 1,112 organizations committed to environmental literacy and more time spent outdoors by children.

A primary mission of the Coalition was the support of federal legislation introduced in 2008 and 2009 by Maryland Representative John Sarbanes and Rhode Island Senator Jack Reed titled the *No Child Left Inside Act* (H.R. 3036 and S. 1981) (Appendix C). If passed, the No Child Left Inside Act will provide new federal funding for outdoor learning activities and high-quality environmental education to states that develop a certified Environmental Literacy Plan.

The Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature held its first meeting in August 2008 at the Arlington Echo Outdoor School. Hundreds of environmental and youth advocates from across Maryland were on hand for an event to help Governor O'Malley kick-off the Partnership, including Representative Sarbanes.

From August 2008 through February 2009, the Partnership held monthly meetings and numerous Workgroup sessions to develop a Children in Nature Plan as charged by the Governor's Executive Order.

Maryland is not the first state to address the children in nature crisis; however, it is the first to combine the tenets of fostering a love and connection to nature through outdoor play with the hands-on

<sup>1</sup> By Oliver Pergams, Ph.D. and Patricia Zaradic, Ph.D. "Kids picking TV over trees" June 2007

<sup>2</sup> Burdette, Hillary L., M.D., M.S.; and Robert C. Whitaker, M.D, M.P.H. "Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children: Looking Beyond Fitness and Fatness to Attention, Affiliation and Affect." © 2005 American Medical Association.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Andrea Faber; and Frances E. Kuo. "Is Contact with Nature Important for Healthy Child Development? State of the Evidence." In Spencer, C. & Blades, M. (Eds.), *Children and Their Environments: Learning, Using and Designing Spaces*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

knowledge benefits of experiential environmental education. It is the comprehensive nature of this approach that the Partnership believes is critical to the success of achieving the Governor's vision of a future Maryland that is loved and cared for by the next generation of stewards.

## Vision

The Partnership's vision is multi-faceted:

From early childhood, Maryland's children and their families play and explore nature in safe neighborhood green spaces and parks, access local streams and waterways, and follow trails that link natural areas to school grounds and other community open spaces.

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All Maryland schools and their grounds serve as community models for green landscape design and operation, energy efficiency and sustainability.

The experiences and lessons gathered throughout their developing years – through classroom learning and outdoor experiences – stay with Maryland's children throughout their lifetimes, preparing them to take active roles in addressing the complex environmental and economic challenges facing our world, and instilling in them a sense of responsibility for and stewardship of the open spaces, waterways and natural resources that so richly shaped their childhood.

## Research

In an effort to better understand the quantity and types of programs, opportunities, and policies that are in place to support the connection of children to nature, the Partnership relied on several sources of data. First, the Community and Public Lands workgroup conducted a review of current efforts and prepared gap analyses in each of the key areas of the Governor's Executive Order. Second, the Environmental Literacy Working Group conducted a review of current environmental education efforts in Maryland schools. In addition, two surveys were administered during the plan development process. A Children in Nature Survey was developed and initiated by the Community and Public Lands Working Group and administered by the Chesapeake Bay Trust to establish baseline levels for many of the objectives contained in the Governor's Executive Order. A second survey was initiated and conducted by the Chesapeake Bay Trust to collect data on public support for outdoor learning relative to other pressing environmental issues. The results of these surveys are discussed in section 2.0 of the report.

## Overarching Themes & Key Recommendations

The Partnership and work groups agreed early on that connecting children to nature and ensuring environmental literacy will best be accomplished through a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach involving both unstructured and structured experiences for children. Thus, in developing its recommendations and strategies, the Partnership sought to use every available social structure

– from the family to the school – to increase the exposure of children to nature.

Recognizing the benefits of the inter-relationship between unstructured outdoor experiences and structured curriculum-based learning, the Partnership defines environmental literacy as:

***students that possess the knowledge, intellectual skills, attitudes, experiences and motivation to make and act upon responsible environmental decisions as individuals and as members of their community.*** Environmentally literate students understand environmental and physical processes and systems, including human systems. They are able to analyze global, social, cultural, political, physical, economic and environmental relationships, and weigh various sides of environmental issues to make responsible decisions as individuals and as members of their community and citizens of the world.

Implementation of the recommendations, therefore, must consider both the formal education and the natural outdoor experiences of the whole child to achieve success in developing a citizenry that is schooled in environmental science, acts responsibly and in accord with a committed stewardship ethic to protect our environment and natural resources, and maintains a connection with and enthusiasm for enjoying our natural world.

Consequently, the Partnership developed a strategic plan that includes 10 major recommendations addressing three over-arching themes.

## Connecting communities and families to nature

Being able to play in a natural setting is vital to a child's development. The wonders of the natural world inspire imagination, creativity, adventure and foster the connection that helps young people grow into the caring adult that will take responsibility for the long-term sustainability of our planet. Yet opportunities for nature play – and the mentors that help teach children about our environment -- are vanishing as open spaces are diminished or sequestered by development. The Partnership developed the following recommendations in support of this goal:

- Incorporate nature play spaces into community health planning, land use planning and community development design.
- Establish a Maryland Trail Development Office to: provide leadership and establish a vision for Maryland's trail system, including the coordination of multi-agency trail planning and funding, orchestration of trail advocacy, creation of a one-stop trail GIS database and website and the development of a new Maryland Trail Town Program.
- Develop a strategic state park and public lands and waterways Interpretive and Outdoor Classroom Plan, which includes the identification of funding needs to support a greater presence of park rangers and seasonal naturalist staff.

## Reaching out to underserved communities that have the least access to nature

The many benefits that children derive from spending time learning and playing outdoors must not be limited to those who live communities with immediate access to vast green landscapes, public lands or open water. The positive impacts on health, physical and emotional development, and academic achievement that

come from unstructured nature play and structured environmental education opportunities are critical for all Maryland children, from rural communities to urban and suburban neighborhoods. The Partnership developed the following recommendations in support of this goal:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive program to increase access and utilization of public lands and waterways for underserved communities.
- Expand and improve the existing Civic Justice Corps (CJC) model to serve 1,000 at-risk youth statewide by 2015 with summer conservation jobs and outdoor enrichment activities.

### **Strengthening students' connection to nature during the school day**

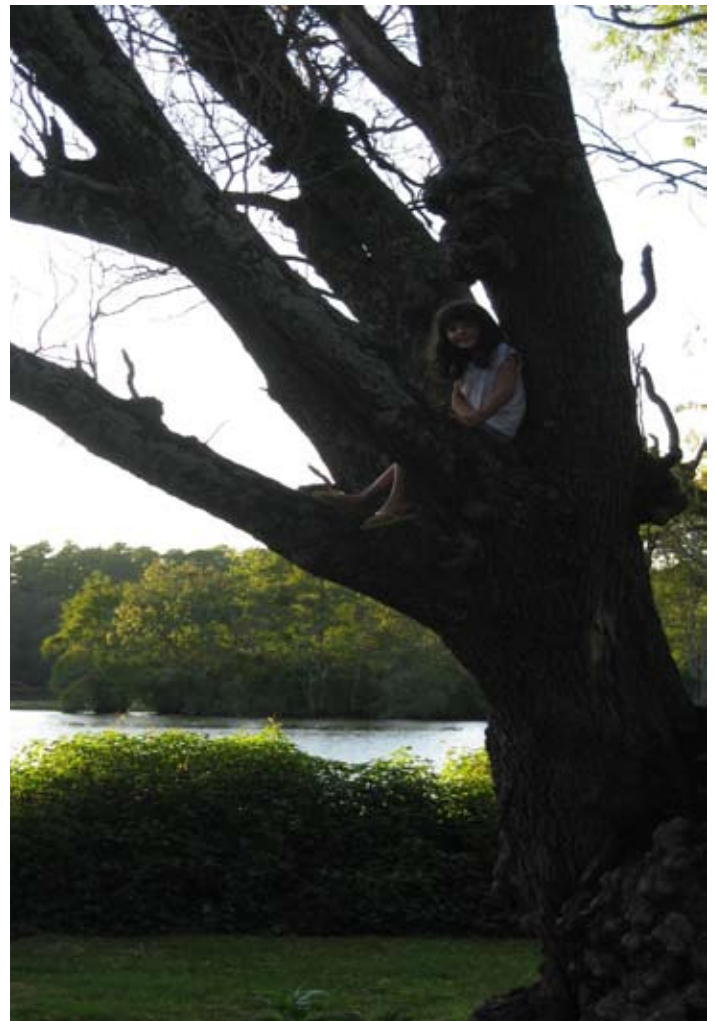
Meaningful outdoor environmental education programs are effective means for re-engaging large numbers of youth with nature in a systemic manner. Course requirements for high school graduates make a strong statement about what skills and knowledge are valued to best prepare students to live and work as productive, responsible citizens. Schoolyard habitats, already embraced by many teachers as an effective and exciting means to reach curricular and service learning goals, are a powerful and easily accessible outdoor "classroom."

To effectively use these tools, all Maryland teachers – from classroom instructors to State Park naturalists to environmental educators -- must have both the preparation and the opportunity to teach their students about the environment, whether in the classroom, on the school grounds, or in the local environment. The Partnership developed the following recommendations in support of this goal:

- Provide an annual meaningful outdoor environmental education experience for every student every year, pre-K through grade 12.
- Require for graduation that every high school student take and pass a designated course of study on environmental literacy as defined in this document.
- Establish a comprehensive initiative to green all schools and school grounds, and embed schoolyard habitat programs as integrated indoor and outdoor instructional components of the curriculum, to create opportunities for outdoor learning experiences for students and members of the community.
- Provide professional development for teachers, state park rangers and naturalists, and other service providers.
- Adopt the Maryland State Environmental Literacy Standards.

Sections 3.0 and 4.0 of the following report summarizes the response to the Executive Order by the Partnership and identifies specific actions for short- and longer-term implementation of these recommendations, lead agency responsibility and options to support those activities including partners and funding.

In addition to these recommendations, the Partnership and its working groups have identified the need for three additional, immediate next steps needed for implementation, as well as a recommendation for developing a funding plan, that are further discussed in section 5.0.



1. Introduce an Outdoor Bill of Rights for Maryland Children as a tool for engaging the public.
2. Launch a statewide campaign for Children in Nature to educate parents, teachers, and other adult leaders and caregivers about the many benefits of the broad spectrum of outdoor play and learning opportunities described in this plan.
3. Host annual Children in Nature Summits to bring together children, partners in formal and non-formal education, state park managers, local governments, and funders to celebrate and evaluate progress made towards the fulfillment of the Children in Nature Plan.

### **Looking Forward**

The goals, strategies and visions outlined in this report suggest bold changes for Maryland's schools and communities, children and families. They are changes that, if implemented, will mark a pivotal moment in time for education, environmental stewardship and the ability of Maryland's young people to personally connect with nature in ways that promote mental, emotional and physical health and well being throughout their lives.

The Partnership will continue to meet and track progress for implementing the recommendations, refine the actions, and identify new partners, needs and resources. The continuation of this Partnership further demonstrates Maryland's commitment to supporting the goals of this Plan and the needs of our children.